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Black, James Conquest Cross

"What the flag means."

[Augusta, Georgia]

[1916]

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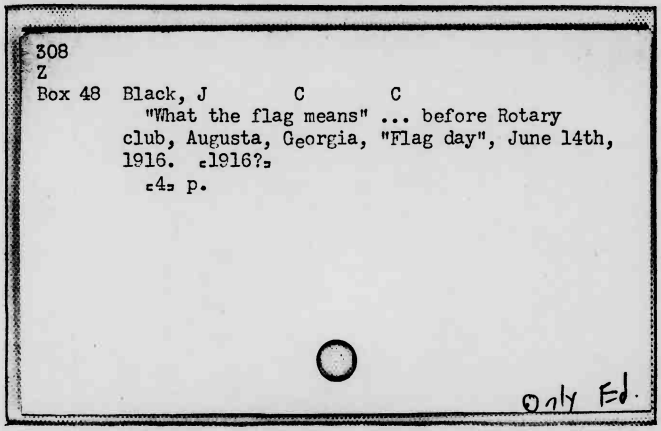

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Gift of the President

"What The Flag Means"

J. C. C. BLACK

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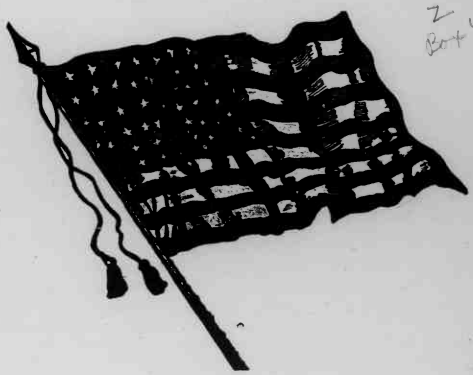

Before ROTARY CLUB
AUGUSTA, GEORGIA
"FLAG DAY," June 14th, 1916.

"WHAT THE FLAG MEANS"

At the Flag Day luncheon of the Rotary Club, at the Genesta, Mr. Black said:

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Rotary Club:—

It is fitting that this club join other kindred organizations throughout the country in observing this anniversary. It is fitting that we remind ourselves of the inestimable political blessings and privileges we enjoy, the inalienable rights guaranteed to us by our system of government, and the responsibilities and duties which they impose, of which the flag is the emblem. We often see, but how infrequently do we pause to ponder upon the memorials and emblems everywhere around us, and learn the lessons they would teach. We repeat the words of the first prayer we are taught, but who has ever learned to fathom its depth. to reach its height, or to compass the length and breadth of its meaning? We witness and participate in the observance of a memorial of the most awful tragedy ever witnessed by angels or men, a tragedy on which the very sun in the heavens refused to shine, the strongest and richest expression of the love of the Infinite, and go our way without any grasp of its significance.

In discharging the patriotic duty to which you have summoned me—I will not say the task which you have imposed—I sensibly feel that you may suffer some disappointment, for it is not my purpose to try to say anything new. I conceive it is more in harmony with the proper observance of the day to reannounce old truths, but fundamental and vital.

We may well ask what the flag does not mean.

It does not mean that our government is one of unlimited power, nor that the people may rule without lawful restraints. It does not mean that he is the best representative who can put his hand furthest in the public treasury and withdraw the largest appropriation. It does not mean that the government has the right or is under the duty of trying to do everything for everybody. It does not mean social equality. It does not mean that every man must have as much as every other man. Such things can not be, and if they could be for this hour. they would be otherwise before the going down of this day's sun. This is a dream of folly, and would be vicious if it could be realized. It does not mean that public patronage is spoils to be dispensed to political freebooters for partisan services.

What does the flag mean? What does it mean to our own and other countries? We are too much accustomed to associate it in our thought only with the army and navy and war. It is the flag of peace as well as war. It commemorates not only our victories on the field of battle, but our achievements in the paths of peace and all that has contributed to our own and the progress of the world.

It means our republic. I prefer to call it this rather than a nation. It means a representative democracy under a supreme law, a government of delegated powers. It means the exercise of those rights which the experience and wisdom of the past have found to be necessary to the fuller enjoyment of that liberty which is our birthright.

Let us recall some of these rights which, though familiar to us in words, we are in danger of not counting their cost or appreciating their value. It means the right to the great writ of habeas corpus, the key that unlocks the door of illegal imprisonment. It means that no bill of attainder or ex post facto law shall be passed; that no title of nobility shall be granted; the right to a speedy and public trial by an impartial jury; the right to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted by the witnesses; to have compulsory process to obtain witnesses; to have the assistance of counsel. It means that excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted. It means the right to keep and bear arms; the right to security in persons, houses and papers agianst unreasonable searches and seizures; the right to a presentment or indictment of a grand jury in cases of capital or otherwise infamous crimes. It means immunity from being twice put in jeopardy of life or limb. It means that no citizen shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, and private property shall not be taken for public use without just compensation. It means the right to cast a free and uncorrupted ballot. It means that there shall be no establishment of religion. It means freedom of conscience—the right of every man to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience; the right to an open Bible and the private interpretation of it; freedom of speech and freedom of the press; the right to peaceably assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances. It means that no punishment shall be imposed on the innocent and none upon the guilty until guilt has been legally established. It means that the power of all the states is pledged to grant to each a republican form of government and protect it against invasion, and in emergencies against domestic violence. It means that the lowest in the land is not beneath the protection of its power, nor the highest above its rightful authority.

It means that over congresses and presidents, yes, and over the people there is a supreme authority. It means government of the people by this authority, as well as government by the people and for the people; that presidents and congresses and people alike are within its limitations. It means that the Constitution and laws of the United States made in pursuance thereof, and all treaties are the supreme law of the land, and the judges of every state shall be bound thereby. anything in the Constitution or laws of any state to the contrary notwithstanding. It establishes a final tribunal to declare when these limitations are transgressed and every transgression of them null and void. May this high and august tribunal ever live in an atmosphere undisturbed by popular clamor, uncorrupted by selfish or partisan influances. firmly and justly established in the confidence, respect and reverence of the people.

There are many popular maxims which we adopt without thought and pass current as embodying great truths, when they are pregnant with fatal error or do not accurately express the truth. One of them is, "Let the safety of the people be the supreme law." Let us rather say the supreme law is the safety of the people.

The flag means liberty—the liberty of every man peacefully to pursue his own path in life and enjoy the fruits of his own effort, but liberty regulated by law. Without law there is not and can not be liberty. It means the largest liberty to the individual, but with due regard to the community. The flag means the supremacy of the civil over the military power. Rightly interpreted, it is an unfailing safeguard against the dangers of militarism. It means honesty, fidelity, economy and efficiency in the administration of government. It means that while there will be political parties they are only means to an end.

It means that no political party has a right to exist whose primary object is party success rather than the common good.

It means our country. Our country is more than our geographical area, more than our great highways of transportation, more than our broad and fertile fields, more than our increasing population, more than our magnificent cities, more than our hoarded wealth. Let us guard ourselves against the fatal prosperity and wealth that breed the excessive indulgences and luxuries and pride that are the precursors of demoralization, degeneration and death. There is national, as well as individual, character, and national no more than individual character can be built on material things. All the past teaches this lesson. Our country is our sentiments, our ideals, our aspirations, our traditions, our principles. It is a rich heritage we enjoy, but it is not ours alone. We are the beneficiaries of the past; we are the trustees of the future. We are bound by every worthy sentiment and every obligation of honor to preserve it and transmit it unimpaired and enriched to those who come after us.

What does it mean to the other countries of the world?

It means that we concede to them the same right to choose their own form of government that we claim for ourselves; that we will do justice to all, the weakest as well as the strongest, and expect and demand justice from all, the strongest as well as the weakest. It means national pride without arrrogance and national courage without bluster. It means that while we are a part of a great world drawn so closely together, so related and inter-related that we have world interests and rights which must be maintained, we claim no right to be a world policeman and improperly interfere with other governments. It means for the strong to oppress the weak is adding the basest meanness to despicable cowardice. It means that a treaty is more than a scrap of paper, that it plights the national honor and any violation of it is national perfidy. It means "friendly relations with all, entangling alliances with none." It means we love peace —peace if it can be; that we abhor war—but war if it must be. It means nothing for aggression and invasion, everything for honorable defense. It means whole-hearted desire to co-operate with other countries in bringing about the reign of reason and justice and rectitude in the adjustment of international differences, rather than resort to the sword.

The principles of which our flag is the eloquent and sacred emblem constitute the very palladium of liberty. Wherever it is unfurled, on land or sea, in peace or war, let it ever proclaim them. Representing these principles, let our hearts give it fealty, and pledge to it as our fathers did, if need be, our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor, and fervently pray that the Supreme Power, to whose guidance they commtted the destiny of the new republic at its brth, may so endow those in authority with wisdom and a sense of justice and right, that no act of dishonor may ever besmirch it.

So, looking upon it, every citizen of the republic, native or foreign-born, at home or abroad, in peace and in war, on land and sea, his eye lustrous with patriotic pride, his heart aglow with patriotic fervor, may with rapture exclaim: Flag of our country, wave on over an indissoluble union of indestructible states, with justice established, domestic tranquility insured, the common defense provided for, the general welfare promoted, the blessings of liberty secured to ourselves and our posterity. Flag of the free, wave on, wave ever. Wave on until religious and political freedom shall bless the world and every man in all the world in a common faith, though differently expressed, may worship the only wise and true God, and enjoy his birthright of liberty founded in wisdom and administered in justice.

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